

## SJ 12 Hearing, Senate Education Committee

February 11, 2009

## Summary of Remarks by Sheila M. Stearns, Commissioner of Higher Education

Members of the Committee, I want to make 5 points about the establishment of another college in the state of Montana:

1. Students – Statewide

The proponents have told you that this bill is all about students. It is, but what we must consider is the needs of students statewide, not just in one valley of the state.

2. Communities – Statewide

The advocates for this bill explain that a new college would be wonderful for their community. I am sure it would be, except for the local property tax increase. The Board of Regents has to be concerned about sharing educational resources for communities all over the state. That means stretching and sharing educational dollars for unfunded non-beneficiary students at tribal colleges, stretching funds for the current underfunded community colleges, stretching funds, for example, to the Lewistown Center where students are paying an \$80 per credit surcharge to help MSU-Northern pay the operation and maintenance costs on their learning center. It means stretching educational dollars to communities such as Glasgow, which have mentioned publicly their desire for a modest branch of the university system in their region. It means stretching the educational dollar to extend even more distance learning classes, programs, and degrees to every corner, farm, ranch, house, apartment, adult education center, and high school in the state. For example, see the attached story from the *Billings Gazette* about establishing a satellite adult education center at the MSU-Billings College of Technology.

3. Community College Elections – Statewide

I once again urge passage of Sen. Dave Lewis's bill, SJ 2, which is currently in the House, to study the community-college formation process in the coming interim. It seems to me and the Board of Regents that no permanent decisions about creating new colleges, with their required new taxes and general fund obligations, should be made until the work of the study committee is completed in the 2011 biennium.

I base this recommendation on our recent experience with the statute as it currently exists. Starting in 2006, our office worked cooperatively with the advocates of a new college on the statutes and process regarding an election. We sought advice from the Attorney General and the Secretary of State. The law required us to use the wording in the attached ballot, which is the exact wording of the ballot that appeared in the May 2007 election. Clearly, through no one's fault except the inadequacy of the statute, the ballot itself was completely insufficient to

voters to inform each and every one of them when they went into the voting booth that they were agreeing to a mandatory permanent mill levy, a new property tax. There are those who believe for that reason, the ballot is yet challengeable in court by a single voter in one of the affected districts. The law, if it is ever to be used again, surely must make the mill-levy obligation as clear to community college voters as it is to K-12 mill levy voters.

#### 4. Alternatives to creating new colleges – in Ravalli County and Statewide:

The Board of Regents passed a resolution reflected and tabbed in your report, that the Montana University System will wholeheartedly assist in developing an alternative for the physical presence of a college in Ravalli County, perhaps one similar to the Lincoln County or Fergus County extended campuses, or something altogether different. The alternative must not be developed FOR Ravalli County. It can only succeed WITH their strong voice, guidance, and local leadership. As it develops as a joint Ravalli County-MUS effort, the college in the Bitterroot can:

- a. Be affordable for the district residents and for the state
- b. Be up and running quickly in leased space
- c. Share resources from other colleges and universities within the university system, and
- d. Pioneer a new approach to creating a regional college without creating new mandatory local property taxes and a whole new and expensive college infrastructure.

The Board of Regents, the Montana University System, and the Office of Higher Education hereby pledge without reservation that if this resolution passes OR fails, we will work with the trustees-elect and others, including students, community leaders, local school superintendents, and local legislators to develop a high-quality, affordable, visible, cost-sharing COLLEGE in Ravalli County.

- #### 5. A New College is Possible in Ravalli County through a consortium approach without the expensive overlay of a brand new college. A new stand-alone college must include expensive services required for accreditation, including but not limited to libraries, financial aid offices, disability services, presidents and other administrators, to name just a few major expenses that can be avoided through a more collaborative effort. Together we can make it happen.

Thank You.

**INSTRUCTIONS TO VOTERS:**

**1. Organization Proposition:** Make an "X" or similar mark in the square before the words "FOR organization" if you wish to vote for the organization of the community college district; make an "X" or similar mark in the square before the words "AGAINST organization" if you wish to vote against the organization of the community college district.

**2. Community College District Trustees:** Make an "X" or similar mark in the square before the name of each candidate for whom you wish to vote. You may use the blank spaces provided to affix preprinted label(s), or write in the name(s) of individual(s) for whom you wish to vote, and vote by making an "X" or similar mark in each square before the name(s).

# OFFICIAL BALLOT

**Community College District of the Bitterroot Valley  
Organization Proposition and Trustee Election  
May 8, 2007**

## ORGANIZATION PROPOSITION

Shall there be organized within the area comprising the School Districts of Corvallis School District #1, Stevensville Elementary School District #2, Hamilton School District #3, Victor School District #7, Darby School District #9, and Lone Rock Elementary School District #13, Ravalli County, State of Montana, a community college district for the offering of 13th- and 14th-year courses, to be known as the Community College District of the Bitterroot Valley, Montana, under the provisions of the laws authorizing community college districts in Montana, as requested in the petition filed with the Board of Regents at Helena, Montana, on the 1st day of March, 2007?

☐ **FOR** Organization

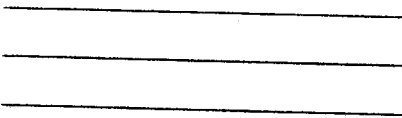
☐ **AGAINST** Organization

**Vote In Next Column**

**FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
DISTRICT TRUSTEES**

**VOTE FOR UP TO SEVEN (7) CANDIDATES**

- ☐ Douglas C. Bower D.V.M.
- ☐ Anna Vee Brandborg
- ☐ Maria A. Cole
- ☐ Donald Jack Contraman
- ☐ Daryl E. Cooper
- ☐ Charles Dresser
- ☐ Jack Michael Eggensperger
- ☐ Gillian Kerby Fretz
- ☐ Winston Lyle Frost
- ☐ Patricia Furniss
- ☐ (Nick) Pete Nickolas Hooper
- ☐ Jane W. Karr
- ☐ LaRue Moorhouse
- ☐ Donald Morton
- ☐ John W. Robinson
- ☐ Deborah Rogala
- ☐ Linda J. Seed
- ☐ Greg Seltzer
- ☐ Melville J. Walters III
- ☐ Zana A. Westfield



perspective. Through innovation, they instill entrepreneurship. Through all of these things, they make a community aware and proud of the fact that they are a community.

## 4.2 Potential Negative Impacts of the New Community College

The benefits of a community college in Ravalli County may come, literally and figuratively, at a cost to the community and the state. Weighing potential negative impacts of the new community college is a component of due diligence.

### 4.2.1 Potential Erosion of Support for Locally Funded Public Services

Locally, the community college will compete for funding with other important services, and local budgets are already tight. With a growing population and few new revenue sources, Ravalli County department heads had to cut their budgets by 11.5% in Fall 2008. According to the local sheriff, these cuts erode officer safety and public safety.<sup>12</sup> County Commissioners told state lawmakers in October 2008<sup>13</sup> that local taxpayers don't want additional levy and bond measures, although they unanimously support the proposed new community college district.<sup>14</sup>

School districts in Ravalli County also face challenges with public support. Last year, school levies in Corvallis, Hamilton, and Lone Rock failed. The year before, two school levies failed in Stevensville. In the past decade, of the 12 school levies submitted to Hamilton voters (multiple levies in some years), only 2 passed. (The ballot measure on the proposed community college also failed there, but the vote in other school districts was substantial enough to offset the Hamilton results.) Since 2002 school levies in Stevensville have failed as often as they've passed.<sup>15</sup> In addition, BVCC-E's plans for adult education may compete with successful programming already provided by school districts in Ravalli County.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Cramer, J. (October 1, 2008). "Commissioners Reviewing Budget Cuts." *Ravalli Republic*.

<sup>13</sup> Cramer, J. (October 13, 2008). "Commission Presents Wish List to Lawmakers." *Ravalli Republic*.

<sup>14</sup> At the Nov. 20, 2008 Board of Regents meeting, Ravalli County Commissioner reported their unanimous support for a new community college district there because they believe that it will revitalize the economy, thereby increasing the tax base.

<sup>15</sup> In its written response to OCHE's draft analysis, BVCC-E pointed out that local support for school levies in Montana communities with community colleges has historically been quite positive. One would hope for a stronger record of support for education initiatives in Ravalli County with the addition of a community college. The failure of three levies in Ravalli County the year after the passage of the ballot measure on the new community college district does not strengthen that hope.

<sup>16</sup> BVCC-E contends that a new community college and local school districts will not compete for funding because the adult education levy is permissive with no cap; therefore, "[s]chool districts and Community Colleges may jointly levy this tax without consulting one another or the tax payer." Further, the BVCC-E questions OCHE's conclusion that the adult education programs provided by school districts in Ravalli County are "successful." OCHE's conclusion is based on the Commissioner's telephone interviews with all seven school district superintendents in Ravalli County in early November. The superintendents expressed pride in the success of their programs.



Story available at <http://www.billingsgazette.net/articles/2009/02/11/news/local/30-cot.txt>

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## 'Adult Ed West' showcased at COT

**By LAURA TODE**  
**Of The Gazette Staff**

Adult education students, seeking a GED or the skills they need to go to college, can now choose where they take classes.

Through a partnership between the Montana State University Billings College of Technology and the School District 2 adult education program, a satellite adult education center was established at the COT.

Prior to the opening of the center, the only place students could take classes was at the Lincoln Center downtown.

The joint program has been operating since September, and was showcased Tuesday with an open house.

The classrooms are located on the second floor of the COT's Technology and Trades Building. The center offers GED prep courses and basic skills to prepare for college.

"I like to think of it as Adult Ed West," said Kathie Daviau, who teaches math at the new center.

The location works well for adult education students from Laurel, Columbus and beyond, Daviau said. She said most of her students are from out of town.

Tanya Oderman of Absarokee recently lost her job at the Stillwater mine. She enrolled in nursing classes at the COT but found out that she needed to brush up on her math skills to be ready for college-level math. Since she was already on campus, the adult education center was a perfect fit.

"I was going to do (math) 101, but it's been, like, 20 years since I've been in school, and I did not use math at the mine," Oderman said.

With Daviau's help, Oderman should be ready to take the class next semester.

Students in the GED program can only take language arts and math components at the COT center, but Daviau said the other two components - science and social studies - could easily be added as interest grows.

The SD2 adult education program still handles enrollment and testing, so prospective students

need to start at the Lincoln Center before being referred to the COT location. Teachers at the center are SD2 employees.

Since September, about 35 students have been served in the new location, Daviau said.

Based on census data, about 120,000 Montanans age 16 or older do not have a diploma or GED.

"That's over 12 percent of our population, and that's unacceptable," said John Cech, dean of the college of technology. "Coming together to create this satellite will create a new pathway for adults to retool and retrain to reach their goals."

Cech said that having an adult education center on campus gives students an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the college atmosphere and provides them with access to the college's student services. When the time comes for an adult education student to start college, it will be a seamless transition, Cech said.

Contact Laura Tode at [ltode@billingsgazette.com](mailto:ltode@billingsgazette.com) or 657-1392.

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